Babar in, Haris out as Pakistan announce squad for T20 World Cup

By Our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: An experienced 15-member Pakistan squad was announced on Sunday for the T20 World Cup to be held in India and Sri Lanka from Feb 7 to March 8, with former captain Babar Azam recalled while pacemen Haris Rauf and Mohammad Wasim Jr were left out.

Salman Ali Agha, who will be playing his first T20 World Cup, has been named captain of the side that has struggled in recent ICC events, failing to progress beyond the first round in the 2023 World Cup, the 2024 T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies, and the 2025 Champions Trophy.

The squad was announced at the Gaddafi Stadium by national selector Aaqib Javed alongside Salman and head coach Mike Hesson.

Nine players in the squad have previous World Cup experience: Babar Azam, Fakhar Zaman, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shadab Khan, Naseem Shah, Mohammad Nawaz, Abrar Ahmed, Saim Ayub and Usman Khan. The remaining six — including the captain — will be appearing in their first World Cup.

Those making their tournament debut are Salman, Faheem Ashraf, Khawaja Mohammad Nafay, Mohammad Salman Mirza, Sahibzada Farhan and Usman Tariq.

Defending Babar's inclusion, Aaqib said the former captain's experience would be vital in Sri Lankan conditions.

"Babar is included because the team needs an experienced, solid batter on Sri Lankan pitches. The batting conditions there are challenging and we need a player like him to perform a specific role," he said.

Babar recently returned to the T20I side and broke Rohit Sharma's record for most runs in the format during the home series against South Africa in October 2025. Pakistan went on to win that series 2-1. Babar is currently the leading run-scorer in T20 internationals with 4,429 runs in 136 matches.

Both Hesson and Salman backed Babar's selection, with the coach describing him as a mature and experienced batter who would strengthen the middle order.

Salman said he could not understand the criticism directed at Babar despite his recent performances.

Explaining the omission of Haris Rauf, Aaqib and Hesson said the selectors opted for a three-man pace attack — Shaheen, Naseem and Salman Mirza — keeping Sri Lankan conditions in mind.

"Haris has served Pakistan for a long time, but we have developed a new combination," Aaqib said, adding that Mohammad Wasim Jr, who is part of the squad for the home series against Australia starting Jan 29, was also left out after considering conditions.

Aaqib admitted Pakistan's recent failures in ICC tournaments but said the current squad had performed well over the past year.

Salman said Pakistan would benefit from playing all their matches in Sri Lanka and avoiding extensive travel, but stressed that performance would still be key.

"Yes, India took full advantage of playing all their matches in one country during the Champions Trophy, but they also played good cricket. We will have to do the same," he said, adding that low-scoring matches were expected in Sri Lanka.

Asked about PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi's recent remarks hinting at a possible boycott of the tournament, Aaqib said the selectors' job was to pick the squad and that decision had been taken.

Pakistan will begin their campaign against the Netherlands on Feb 7, followed by matches against the USA on Feb 10, India on Feb 15 and Namibia on Feb 18.

The squad includes several all-round options in Shadab Khan, Mohammad Nawaz and Faheem Ashraf. The pace attack will be led by Shaheen alongside Naseem and Salman Mirza, while Shadab, Abrar Ahmed and Usman Tariq form the spin contingent.

As many as 20 teams are competing in the tournament, divided into four groups of five. Pakistan are placed in Group 'A', where India and the USA are expected to be their toughest rivals. In the previous edition, the USA had upset Pakistan, contributing to their early exit.

The top two teams from each group will qualify for the Super Eight stage.

Pakistan squad:

Salman Ali Agha (captain), Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Khawaja Mohammad Nafay (wicket-keeper), Mohammad Nawaz, Mohammad Salman Mirza, Naseem Shah, Sahibzada Farhan, Saim Ayub, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shadab Khan, Usman Khan (wicket-keeper), Usman Tariq

MELBOURNE: Russia's Daniil Medvedev in action during the Australian Open match against Learner Tien of the US at Melbourne Park on Sunday.—Reuters

Sabalenka, Alcaraz ease into Australian Open quarters

MELBOURNE: Aryna Sabalenka extended her reign as tiebreak queen to reach the Australian Open quarter-finals for a fourth successive year and Carlos Alcaraz joined her as Daniil Medvedev's campaign ended on Sunday.

Third seed Coco Gauff advanced to her third quarter-finals in a row with a pulsating 6-1, 3-6, 6-3 victory over crafty Czech Karolina Muchova in a late-afternoon contest at Margaret Court Arena, while Alexander Zverev and Alex de Minaur eased through.

But three-times finalist Medvedev was handed another harsh lesson by his new nemesis Learner Tien, the Russian going down 6-4, 6-0, 6-3 to the American again at Melbourne Park.

"He played great, super-aggressive. Even when I was making good shots, he was making a better shot back," Medvedev said. "I didn't find many solutions today on the court, which is rare, and I didn't feel that many times in my life like this."

Tien progressed despite a nosebleed in the first set that required lengthy treatment. He later said his nose was just dry.

"Every year since I've been coming here, the crowd support has been amazing," said Tien, the youngest men's quarter-finalist at Melbourne Park since Nick Kyrgios in 2015.

Twice champion and favourite Sabalenka was first out on a glorious morning, seeing off Canadian 19-year-old Victoria Mboko 6-1, 7-6(7/1) in a match of two halves.

The Belarusian was at her best as she crushed the teen in a 31-minute opening set and raced to a 4-1 lead in the second before Mboko produced a thrilling fightback.

Breaking Sabalenka twice on the way to a 6-5 lead, Mboko then hit a brick wall as the Belarusian raised her game to notch a 20th successive tiebreak win at Grand Slams, eclipsing Novak Djokovic's record of 19 between Wimbledon 2005 and 2007.

PUSHED HARD

Belarusian Sabalenka heaped praise on her young opponent.

"It's incredible to see these kids coming up on the tour," said the world number one, who has reached 13 successive Grand Slam quarter-finals."

Having taken down one young gun, Sabalenka gets a shot at another in the quarter-finals against 18-year-old American Iva Jovic, who thrashed Kazakh veteran Yulia Putintseva 6-0, 6-1 at John Cain Arena.

The men's tournament has seen few surprises of the magnitude of Mboko and Jovic, with the final 16 shut out by seeded players for the first time at any Grand Slam in the professional era.

Top seed Alcaraz did his bit in preserving the status quo despite facing arguably his toughest test during this tournament against 19th seed Tommy Paul, a semi-finalist in 2023.

Alcaraz appeared in cruise control in a 7-6(8/6), 6-4, 7-5 win under the afternoon sun at Rod Laver Arena.

The Spaniard has in the past struggled with precision and a lack of consistency in his serving technique.

He is now sporting a new-look serve that has become a handy weapon — and been compared to Djokovic's serve.

"I had a Djokovic message saying, 'you have to pay me'," he said in his on-court interview.

Once a stubborn matchup for Alcaraz, Paul has now lost on three Grand Slam surfaces to the Spaniard following last year's quarter-final thrashing at the French Open and his 2024 defeat at Wimbledon.

"I guess the way that I would describe it is, he suffocates you in a way," Paul said of Alcaraz. "He makes you feel like you have no time."

LOCAL HERO

Alcaraz next takes on Australian Alex de Minaur, who brushed aside 10th-seeded Kazakh Alexander Bublik 6-4, 6-1, 6-1 to make his second successive quarter-final at Melbourne Park.

"I'm super pleased with my level, I'm excited for the next one," said De Minaur, who is looking to be the first Australian to win the tournament since compatriot Mark Edmondson's triumph five decades ago.

"I'm going to have to come out all guns blazing and I'm excited for a battle against Carlitos."

Last year's runner-up Zverev stayed on track in his bid for an elusive maiden Grand Slam title, beating Francisco Cerundolo 6-2, 6-4, 6-4.

Even as the fourth-round action unfolded on court, Djokovic was given the news he had reached the quarter-finals as fourth-round opponent Jakub Mensik withdrew due to an abdominal injury a day before they were scheduled to meet.

While the leading men eased through, two-times Grand Slam champion Gauff saw three match points slip through her fingers before she prevailed in a proper scrap against 19th seed Muchova, a former semi-finalist.

"She definitely elevated her game and I thought I was sometimes a bit passive," said Gauff, who next faces Elina Svitolina after the Ukrainian beat Mirra Andreeva 6-2, 6-4.—Agencies

PSL players' auction set to be held on Feb 11

By Our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Sunday announced Feb 11 as the date for the players' auction for the Pakistan Super League (PSL) 11 and also unveiled the base prices and bidding structure for the landmark event.

The decisions were taken at a detailed workshop presided over by PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi and attended by representatives of all eight franchises, PSL chief executive Salman Naseer and leading players including Babar Azam, Fakhar Zaman, Hasan Ali and Shaheen Shah Afridi.

According to a PCB press release, the PSL management made a detailed presentation on the mechanics of the retention and auction process, following which all stakeholders agreed on the Feb 11 date.

It was also decided that all bids and minimum incremental increases would be made in Pakistani rupees.

The base prices have been set at four tiers: Rs4.2 crore, Rs2.2 crore, Rs1.1 crore and Rs60 lakh. The minimum incremental bids will be Rs250,000 for amounts under Rs1.1 crore, Rs500,000 for bids under Rs2.2 crore, Rs1 million for bids under Rs4.2 crore and Rs1.5 million for bids above Rs4.2 crore. Franchises will be free to bid higher than the minimum increments.

Each franchise will be required to have a squad of between 16 and 20 players, including five to seven overseas players depending on squad size. Teams must field a minimum of three and a maximum of four foreign players in the playing XI.

It will also be mandatory for each squad to include at least two uncapped Under-23 players, with at least one featuring in the playing XI.

Players retained or picked in the PSL 11 auction will be signed on two-year contracts. After PSL 11, franchises will be able to retain up to seven players for the 12th edition. Following PSL 12, a grand auction will be held in which each franchise will be allowed a maximum of five retentions, with all released players returning to the auction pool.

Franchises will also be entitled to directly sign one foreign player for PSL 11 who did not feature in PSL 10. The team purse of Rs45 crore will be extendable to Rs50.5 crore to accommodate such signings, with the PCB also contributing towards the recruitment of elite foreign players.

This will be the first time in the league's history that players will be hired through an auction rather than a draft.

Naqvi welcomed the shift in the recruitment model.

"I'm delighted that a consultative and productive session was held between the franchises, players and management, resulting in informed and strategic decisions which will pave the way for a bright future for the HBL PSL," he said.

"The player auction model is a landmark step, offering players better financial opportunities through an increased salary purse and a transparent acquisition process, while making the league more competitive and attractive."

'BD absence from T20 World Cup a sad moment for the game'

NEW DELHI: The absence of Bangladesh from next month's Twenty20 World Cup is a sad moment for the game and should serve as a call for stakeholders to work towards uniting the sport, not dividing it, the international cricketers' association said on Sunday.

Bangladesh were replaced by Scotland in the 20-team showpiece on Saturday following their refusal to tour India over safety concerns in the wake of soured political relations between the Asian neighbours.

The governing International Cricket Council (ICC) rejected Bangladesh's request to move their matches to tournament co-host Sri Lanka, saying it was not feasible to change the schedule so close to the February 7 start of the tournament.

"The withdrawal of Bangladesh from the T20 World Cup, and resulting absence of a valued cricketing nation from cricket's pinnacle international T20 event, is a sad moment for our sport, the Bangladesh players and fans, and one that requires deep reflection," World Cricketers' Association (WCA) Chief Executive Tom Moffat said in a statement.

"Rather than allowing division or exclusion to take hold, we call on the games leaders to work with all stakeholders, including Governing Bodies, leagues and players, to unite the sport, not divide it ..."

The events underline the current tension in South Asian cricket. India's fraught political relations with Pakistan prompted the ICC to broker an arrangement allowing them to play at a neutral venue when their neighbour hosts a global tournament.

Pakistan are set to play all their matches at the upcoming T20 World Cup in Sri Lanka, though the country's board (PCB) chief Mohsin Naqvi said on Saturday their participation was still not confirmed.

"The prime minister is not in Pakistan right now. When he returns, I'll be able to give you our final decision," Naqvi told reporters.

Moffat said the WCA had become increasingly concerned by agreements not being honoured in the sport and by a lack of meaningful consultation with players and their representatives.

"It also highlights significant issues with the game's existing operating model at global level," he added. "These issues, if continued to be left unaddressed, will weaken trust, unity, and ultimately the health and future of the game we love." —Reuters

Bowlers, Abhishek fire India to T20 series win over NZ

GUWAHATI: Inspired bowling and a 14-ball fifty by opener Abhishek Sharma led India to a crushing eight-wicket series-clinching win over New Zealand in the third T20 international on Sunday.

Pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah with figures of 3-17 and leg-spinner Ravi Bishnoi (2-18) kept New Zealand down to 153-9 after India elected to field first in Guwahati.

Left-handed Abhishek then hit an unbeaten 20-ball 68 and skipper Suryakumar Yadav made 57 not out as India romped home with 10 overs to spare to take an unbeatable 3-0 lead in the five-match series.

It was the ninth straight T20 series win for reigning T20 World Cup champions India.

The series is a warm-up ahead of the T20 World Cup starting on February 7 in India and Sri Lanka.

Scoreboard

NEW ZEALAND:
D. Conway c Pandya b Rana 1
T. Seifert b Bumrah 12
R. Ravindra c Bishnoi b Pandya 4
G. Phillips c Kishan b Bishnoi 48
M. Chapman c Samson b Bishnoi 32
D. Mitchell c Kishan b Pandya 14
M. Santner c Sharma b Bumrah 27
K. Jamieson b Bumrah 3
M. Henry run out 1
I. Sodhi not out 2
J. Duffy not out 4
EXTRAS (LB-4, W-1) 5
TOTAL (for nine wickets, 20 overs) 153
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-2 (Conway), 2-13 (Ravindra), 3-34 (Seifert), 4-86 (Chapman), 5-112 (Mitchell), 6-112 (Phillips), 7-132 (Jamieson), 8-134 (Henry), 9-144 (Santner)
BOWLING: Rana 4-0-35-1, Pandya 3-0-23-2, Bishnoi 4-0-18-2, Bumrah 4-0-17-3, K. Yadav 3-0-32-0 (1w), Dube 2-0-24-0
INDIA:
S. Samson b Henry 0
A. Sharma not out 68
I. Kishan c Chapman b Sodhi 28
S. Yadav not out 57
EXTRAS (W-2) 2
TOTAL (for two wickets, 10 overs) 155
DID NOT BAT: S. Dube, R. Singh, H. Pandya, H. Rana, R. Bishnoi, K. Yadav, J. Bumrah
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-0 (Samson), 2-53 (Kishan)
BOWLING: Henry 2-0-28-1, Duffy 2-0-38-0, Jamieson 1-0-17-0 (2w), Sodhi 2-0-28-1, Santner 2-0-28-0, Phillips 1-0-16-0
RESULT: India won by eight wickets.
PLAYER-OF-THE-MATCH: Jasprit Bumrah

"This is the brand of cricket which we want to play, irrespective of our batting first or chasing," said Suryakumar. "For example, if we are 24 for 3 or 44 for 4 tomorrow, we know how to bat."

New Zealand quick Matt Henry bowled Sanju Samson with the first ball of India's chase but the hosts soon took charge with Ishan Kishan and fellow left-hander Abhishek hitting a flurry of fours and sixes.

The pair put on 53 runs off 19 balls before Kishan fell for 28 off Ish Sodhi, but Abhishek raced to India's second fastest in the format.

Abhishek missed out on his mentor Yuvraj Singh's fastest T20 fifty record for India by two balls. Yuvraj scored a fifty in 12 balls in 2007.

Abhishek kept up the attack with Suryakumar, who hit his second successive fifty in his 26-ball knock. The duo put on an unbeaten stand of 102 to underline India's status as the world's number one-ranked T20 team.

India's bowlers set up victory with the pacers taking three wickets inside first six overs including Harshit Rana dismissing Devon Conway for the fifth time in successive white-ball matches.

Rachin Ravindra fell for four to Hardik Pandya. Bumrah, who was named player of the match, then bowled wicket-keeper-batter Tim Seifert for 12 as New Zealand slumped to 34-3.

Glenn Phillips, who made 48 off 40 balls, and attempted to pull things back in a partnership of 54 for the fourth wicket with Mark Chapman before Bishnoi broke through.

Bishnoi, who made the Indian XI after nearly a year, had Chapman caught behind for 32 and later denied Phillips a half-century.

Wickets kept tumbling and despite skipper Mitchell Santner's 27 off 17 balls New Zealand fell well short of a testing total.

"I think I'll give credit to India with the ball as well," said Santner. "They made it really tough for us. Obviously wickets in the powerplay is key. And then for us to scrap to 150, we knew it would be a challenge from there."

The fourth match is on Wednesday in Visakhapatnam.—AFP

Villa down Newcastle to stay in title hunt, Chelsea beat Palace

NEWCASTLE: Aston Villa closed to within four points of the Premier League summit with an impressive 2-0 win against Newcastle United, while Chelsea climbed into the top four on Sunday.

Villa bounced back from a shock 1-0 defeat at home to Everton last weekend to remain on the fringes of the title race.

Emi Buendia put Unai Emery's men on course for their first win at St. James' Park since 2005 with a brilliant strike from outside the box on 19 minutes.

Newcastle were shorn of inspiration without injured captain Bruno Guimaraes in a damaging defeat for their chances of Champions League qualification.

Ollie Watkins set the seal on Villa's victory when the England international headed in Lucas Digne's cross two minutes from time.

Newcastle slip to ninth but still only three points outside the top five, which will likely be enough for a place in the Champions League.

Even if Villa fall short on a first league title since 1981, they are well on course for a return to Europe's elite competition with an 11-point advantage over sixth-placed Manchester United.

Meanwhile, Chelsea piled more pain on Crystal Palace with a 3-1 win at Selhurst Park.

Oliver Glasner promised to do his best to turn around a miserable run for the Eagles despite announcing he will leave the club when his contract expires at the end of the season.

The Austrian was furious at the manner club captain Marc Guehi was allowed to depart for Manchester City earlier this week and could also lose star striker Jean-Philippe Mateta before the transfer window closes.

Mateta wasted Palace's best chance of a bright opening when he fired straight at Robert Sanchez.

But the home side never recovered after a wayward backpass from Jaydee Canvot freed Estevao to sprint clear and fire in Chelsea's opener on 34 minutes.

The Brazilian then set up compatriot Joao Pedro to gallop in behind the Palace defence and double the Blues' advantage just after half-time.

Enzo Fernandez's penalty rounded off a fourth win in five games for Liam Rosenior since he took charge at Stamford Bridge.

Palace's misery was compounded when England international Adam Wharton was sent off for two bookable offences.

After 11 games without a win, the Eagles are now looking over their shoulder, just eight points above the relegation zone.

Elsewhere, Nottingham Forest gave their survival chances a huge boost by inflicting just a second home defeat of the season on Brentford.

West Ham's victory over Sunderland on Saturday piled the pressure on Sean Dyche's men.

But they responded to move five points clear of the drop zone with a 2-0 win in west London thanks to goals from Igor Jesus and Taiwo Awoniyi.

LIVERPOOL CRISIS DEEPENS

On Saturday, Bournemouth midfielder Amine Adli struck deep in second-half stoppage time to condemn Liverpool to their seventh Premier League defeat of the season, leaving the reigning champions still searching for their first league win of 2026.

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk said he thought he had been fouled in the build-up to Bournemouth's winner, which came after a chaotic scramble following a long throw, but in the end his side capitulated again despite dominating for much of the second half.

"Losing never feels good, especially as a Liverpool player, and in the season we're trying to find consistency," the Dutch defender told Sky Sports.

Goals from Evanilson and Alejandro Jimenez had Bournemouth 2-0 up by the 33rd minute, but Van Dijk pulled one back before the break and Dominik Szoboszlai levelled with a brilliant free kick in the 80th minute.

The Reds looked set for a fifth draw in a row in the league but Adli struck in the 95th minute to shatter their visitors and send them back to Merseyside empty-handed.

A 3-0 win over Olympique de Marseille in the Champions League in midweek suggested that Arne Slot's side might be rediscovering their form but Saturday's late winner prompted questions about Liverpool's morale and ability to close out games.

"I don't think there's any question about that together-

LONDON: Chelsea's Joao Pedro (C) shoots to score during the English Premier League match against Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park on Sunday.—AFP

ness but the consistency that we're looking for, that's something still needs to be found and that's the reality," Van Dijk said.

"I think there was a lot of praise of our performances and a lot of individual praise and we know how it works, and three days later, you lose a game like we did today and then the other side of the world comes out, so that's something we have to deal with.

"But you know, we want to perform, we want to win games, and unfortunately today it didn't happen."

The defeat leaves Liverpool languishing in fourth place on 36 points, while Bournemouth move up to 13th.—Agencies